

As the FCDO-funded CASA Programme entered its seventh and final year, country teams from Ethiopia, Malawi, Nepal, and Rwanda gathered in Kathmandu in February 2025 for a final learning and planning workshop. With 97 agri-SME and partner relationships winding down, the teams shared candid reflections on closing out responsibly and effectively. Curated by Ailsa Buckley, CASA's Market Systems Lead, these insights offer practical tips for other practitioners navigating the complex but crucial process of programme close-out.

TOP TIPS

- A successful exit starts at the design phase, not when the project winds down.
- Scaling impact means looking beyond the immediate partner to embrace the wider market system.
- A strong, responsible close-out reinforces continuity, empowering partners to sustain innovations independently.
- Partnerships thrive on trust and ongoing engagement—not just signed contracts.
- Let every lesson learned live beyond the project to fuel your next breakthrough.
- Clear expectations prevent last-minute surprises and keep the journey on track.
- Celebrate small wins; they're the building blocks of long-term success.
- Adaptability is key: realign incentives to keep partnerships relevant.
- Robust record keeping isn't just compliance; it's a safeguard for your credibility.
- Treat close-out reports as learning tools, not just tick-box exercises.
- Rigorously review results to ensure interventions have lasting impact.
- Standardised knowledge management preserves institutional memory for future wins.
- Partnership closure should feel like an evolution, not an abrupt goodbye.
- Celebrate achievements to inspire ongoing momentum and spark new opportunities for scale.

Plan your exit from the start

The foundation for a successful exit is laid long before formal agreements are signed with partners. Sustainability and scale depend on how well the intervention is structured and how carefully partners are selected. The goal is not just to implement an initiative but to ensure it has the strength to thrive beyond the project's lifespan. This depends on how well expectations are aligned, reinforced, and adapted throughout the engagement. Investing time in scoping the right partners, i.e., those motivated to carry the work forward, is crucial. From the outset, agree on a clear pathway for scaling and ensure it is embedded in the partner's business plan, so they feel empowered to continue rolling out innovations long after the project has ended. Managing expectations and building a clear exit strategy from the outset will ensure the partnerships evolve naturally toward sustainability.

A successful exit is not an afterthought; it starts at the design phase. By managing expectations and building an honest, relational foundation from day one, you ensure that when the project closes, the partner's journey is just beginning.

Explore pathways to scale

Impact should extend beyond the initial partner. A successful approach embraces intentional activities to ensure ideas spread beyond individual partnerships (creating a ripple effect in the broader market) and beyond the end of a project. Thinking through how new business models can be taken up by other players is essential to ensure benefits to more target clients over time. This intentionality includes building communication for scale activities in the final phases of pilots to catalyse uptake by other market actors. Scaling frameworks like Adopt, Adapt, Expand, Respond (AAER²) can help prioritise business models for more focused support in the latter part of a project. The best close-outs reinforce business continuity, and how models will evolve without external support, reinforcing ownership and commitment from partners. They recognise that while a project may end, the partner's operations continue beyond direct intervention and donor funding.

What motivates partners is demonstrating that the activity prioritised for execution still brings the incentives they signed up for at the onset.

1. For more on partnerships, check out our learning paper on [Partnering with AgriSMEs for Development Impact: Lessons from CASA](#).
2. Check out this [framework for managing and measuring systemic change processes](#).

Foreground business continuity

The business existed before the project, and it will exist after the project. Businesses operate on different timelines from development programmes. The goal is to ensure partners see the close-out as a transition rather than an abrupt ending. It is often beneficial to design project activities in a way that gradually reduces project support while progressively shifting responsibility to the partner. The project existed to temporarily support, not to sustain, so the transition should be structured and designed to strengthen independence. A thoughtful close-out means sitting together to assess what worked, what did not, what remains unfinished, and what the partner should carry forward. This ensures the close-out is framed as an evolution, not a shutdown. Transparency with partners ensures they understand what comes next, preventing uncertainty.

Remember that whilst the project is closing, the business is continuing. A successful exit is about managing that transition with honesty, a clear strategy, and standardised processes.

Invest in ongoing communication

Partnerships are not just transactional agreements; they are social entities built on trust, shared values, and mutual understanding. A strong relationship is not formed through contracts; it is nurtured through consistent, honest engagement. Keep communication open and dynamic. Define expectations on both sides and manage those expectations. Be a resource to partners and discuss challenges beyond just project-related issues. When partnerships are strong throughout the engagement, agreeing on a clear exit strategy becomes a natural extension of the process rather than a difficult conversation. A strong exit means ensuring that partners understand their role in evolving their business model to sustain impact, reinforcing ownership rather than dependency. Keeping doors open for future engagement strengthens long-term trust and collaboration.

One of the best practices is simply to call your partner. Not for work, but just to check in, share a thought about the weather or an event. That simple act of maintaining a personal connection keeps the relationship alive and makes future collaboration inevitable.

Learn and adapt

The partner's goals and plans should evolve based on learning and outlive the partnership. Even though contracts will end, the partnerships will live on in the lessons learned. Closing a partnership is a chance to codify learning, not just finalise contracts. No engagement is ever perfect, and every interaction provides valuable insights into what can be improved

for future initiatives. The ability to adapt, evolve, and refine partnership approaches ensures long-term impact.

Keep adapting. Always ask yourself, "What more can we do to improve and evolve this relationship in light of what we've learned?"

Manage expectations throughout

Successful transitions require clear expectations. Misaligned expectations can lead to uncertainty and resistance. From the beginning, it must be clear that the project is a temporary catalyst, and that the partner must own and sustain the innovation. Both parties must clearly communicate their value proposition to the other from the outset, including the boundaries and non-negotiable areas, as well as the DOs and DON'Ts. Regular reinforcement of these expectations and the project's role prevents misalignment, especially relating to financial support. Clear and consistent communication about the project's role and limitations helps us to establish and maintain credibility as a systems facilitator. Reinforcing the partner's role in sustaining the initiative will prevent last-minute misalignments or unrealistic expectations.

Managing expectations is essential. We enter a partnership with our own vision—and so do our partners. When closing a project, it is vital to sit together to review what has been achieved, address any gaps, and clearly agree on what must be carried forward.

Engage in open honest reflection

A series of close-out meetings with partners is essential to take stock of the progress made, the lessons learned, and the next steps for sustainability and scale, such as securing the needed finance. These discussions provide an opportunity to review the original objectives, adaptations made along the way, and future opportunities. Talk to a partner about what they should build on and how. Ensure the transition is strategic rather than reactive. Providing tangible evidence of success keeps motivation high for continuation. Talk about the value of the innovation and the skills they have acquired as well as the quantity of existing and potential reach. Partners need space to process their experiences, assess their capacity for future expansion, and recognise the value of what they have achieved—even if the outcomes are not immediately tangible. Highlighting small wins is just as important as celebrating the big ones. Dialogue reinforces their ability to carry forward lessons independently, positioning the close-out as a moment of empowerment, not detachment.

When closing a project, sit down with your partner; honestly share your views on what worked and what did not, so everyone is on the same page about what was achieved and what should be carried forward.

Review and realign incentives

Talk to partners about their original incentives, as well as their current incentives for continuing and scaling activities. Partner motivation shifts over time, so revisiting a partner's financial and social incentives regularly (even during the close-out stage) ensures continued alignment. Use any new information to reshape activities and realign the incentives of the partner and the project. Not all partnerships will carry forward seamlessly. If a partner's priorities have evolved in a way that no longer fits the intervention, it's better to recognise this, exit strategically and allow for resources to be directed where they are most effective. Using tools like the willingness and capacity matrix³ can help identify and prioritise which partners have the drive and ability to carry forward key activities.

If you feel like the partnership is not progressing, see it as an opportunity to pivot, adapt, and reimagine your approach, rather than a dead end.

Encourage consistent record keeping

While financial documentation is a compliance necessity for the project, it should also serve the partner and should not feel like a bureaucratic burden. Encourage partners to keep records – it is good practice for them and a vital element of an investable business – not just a requirement for you. It strengthens their capacity for independent success and helps them maintain stability and credibility in their future operations. Guide partners through what is needed and align your requirements with theirs. Plan for a well-managed closing process to ensure that you get everything that you need. Settle all contracts, payments, and obligations cleanly to safeguard credibility and ensure a smooth wrap-up.

Maintaining financial records for two or three years after a project is not just a bureaucratic necessity; it is a safeguard for your credibility.

Review your results

Project closure involves both financial reconciliation and programmatic assessment. On the financial side, all funds must be accounted for, budgets reconciled, audits undertaken, and donor reports completed with full transparency. Programmatically, it is about assessing deliverables against targets, measuring outcomes and impact, and ensuring key innovations have real potential to last beyond the project. It is also about assessing the accruing business results for the partner against short- and long-term targets. Project

reporting should not just reflect what was done, but how those interventions set partners up for continued success.

When closing a project, sit down with your partner and rigorously review what was achieved and what remains unfulfilled—this reflection ensures alignment on the way forward.

Engage in collaborative reporting

A close-out report should serve as a learning document that genuinely adds value. Joint evaluations create an opportunity to reflect on how funding was used, what return on investment was achieved, and how partners might sustain the work moving forward. From a technical perspective, use reflection discussions with partners to jointly evaluate how the partnership has worked from both partner and project sides. Where possible, return on investment calculations should be incorporated, comparing partner contributions to project inputs to provide a clearer picture of what was achieved versus what could have been done differently with commercial funding. By collaborating with partners on reflective assessments, reporting becomes an opportunity to refine future approaches rather than just an administrative task.

Close-out reporting should be more than just a tick-box exercise. It must serve as a joint, technical and financial evaluation that captures the true value of what the partnership has achieved, ensuring lessons are preserved.

Standardise knowledge management

One of the most overlooked aspects of closing projects is ensuring future access to critical insights. A structured, standardised checklist helps teams preserve institutional memory by making reports, agreements, and evaluation materials easily retrievable for those who need them later. Standardisation prevents loose ends and misplaced documentation. Ensure that every partner's close-out process follows the same structure, with key information stored in an accessible, organised archiving system (such as a shared digital repository) to ensure future teams and stakeholders can access lessons learned and official documentation. This prevents situations where knowledge is lost.

Standardising knowledge management by storing all partnership information in one accessible repository not only preserves institutional memory but also empowers future teams to build on our shared lessons.

3. Check out [this will/skill framework](#).

Celebrate success

Closure should not feel like abandonment; it should feel like a milestone in the partner's journey. It is not just about shutting down operations, but also honouring achievements and ensuring momentum continues. Publicising project outcomes through articles, social media, and stakeholder events reinforces the value created, motivating partners and clients alike. People need to reflect on their progress, recognise their contributions, and feel inspired to sustain their efforts long after the project's formal end. Closure should leave partners feeling empowered, not uncertain. Capture and share your insights to ensure that lessons learned live beyond the project and inform future initiatives.

Project celebration is not just about marking an end; it is about sparking expansion and inviting fresh participation from partners and other industry players.

Promote scale through engagement events

The best project close-outs do not just mark an ending; they trigger new beginnings. Close-out events serve a dual purpose: celebrating success and driving future adoption. A final event bringing together key industry players provides an opportunity to share tested business models and encourage widespread uptake across the market ecosystem. An intentional, well-structured closing ensures that partners feel encouraged to take ownership of their growth trajectory while sparking interest from other actors who might replicate successful models. In short, a well-executed close-out strategy is not just about ending partnerships; it is about ensuring successful models are embedded into industry-wide practices, ensuring long-term impact beyond individual partnerships.

A close-out event is a deliberate, strategic opportunity to trigger expansion, invite fresh partnerships, and reinforce the pride and commitment of everyone involved.



Partnership | Progress | Prosperity

This project and learning brief were funded by UK International Development. However, the views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies, or those of the implementing partners.

